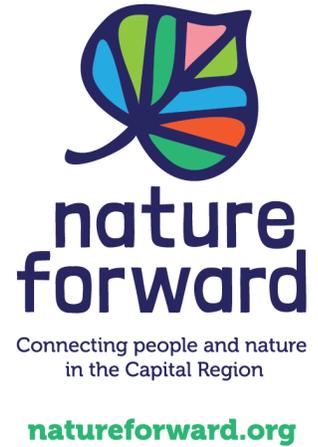


April 11, 2023

**Written testimony for Fiscal Year 2024 Montgomery County Operating Budget - in support of increases in funding for Climate Change, Racial Equity & Social Justice, Clean water & Stormwater, Recycling, Transit, and Parks.**

Submitted by: Denisse Guitarra, MD Conservation Advocate, Nature Forward



Dear Montgomery County Council,

Nature Forward (formerly Audubon Naturalist Society) is the oldest independent environmental organization protecting nature in the DC metro region. Our mission is to inspire residents of the greater Washington, DC, region to appreciate, understand, and protect their natural environment through outdoor experiences, education, and advocacy. We thank the Council for the opportunity to provide testimony for Montgomery County's FY24 Operating Budget.

Nature Forward would like to highlight that currently the Environment section only gets 2.7%<sup>1</sup> of the total operating budget. This is relatively a small slice of the pie when knowing that climate change has a direct impact on all of us, all our infrastructure, and is a threat multiplier across all the other ongoing crises.

We have divided our testimony into two categories which are: 1) **We Support**, these are areas we support the allocated funds in the proposed budget and, 2) **We Recommend**, these are areas where we recommend more funds to be added or modified. We also provide additional comments in both the areas we support and recommend funding. We ask the Council to consider and carefully review our budget requests as presented in our testimony.

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<sup>1</sup> Montgomery County Operating Budget FY24. Available at: <https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/BASISOPERATING/Common/Index.aspx>



## **WE SUPPORT:**

We support and ask Council to approve funding of the following categories.

- Nature Forward supports the County Executive's recommendation of **allocating \$271.6 million toward climate change in the operating and capital budgets.**<sup>2</sup> These funds will help the County continue with the implementation phases of the County Climate Action Plan.<sup>3</sup>
- **Department of Environmental Protection (DEP):** We support the following DEP programs to be funded at the proposed amounts as listed below and provide additional comments.
  - \$750,000 increase for the Tree Canopy Fund to plant more shade trees. Trees provide multiple benefits such as urban heat reduction, stormwater reduction, and mental well-being. We applaud the County for expanding DEP's Tree Montgomery program to plant more shade trees in urban areas.
  - \$370,000 increase funding for illicit discharge detection and elimination to reduce pollution. This measure will help the county meet its MS4 permit requirements and also maintain our waterways cleaner and pollution free.
  - \$200,000 increase for Rainscapes grant program to fund additional rebates for residential stormwater management projects. We support the County for allocating DEP enough funds to cover its RainScapes program which is always in high demand among county residents, and which has had to stop continuously during the past years due to lack of funding and personnel. Council should consider improving the access of the Rainscapes program to a broader range of diverse communities.
  - We support the addition of funding for new positions in waterway pollutant reduction, improvement of water quality, water monitoring, forests, clean energy, electrification, and grants management. By adding new capacity, DEP will be able to expand its current programs and also explore new areas which were pending funding.

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<sup>2</sup> County Executive Elrich Releases Recommended \$6.8 Billion Fiscal Year 2024 Operating Budget That Includes 10-Cent Increase in Property Tax Rate Exclusively to Fully Fund MCPS Request. March 15, 20223. Available at: <https://montgomerycmd.blogspot.com/2023/03/county-executive-elrich-releases.html>

<sup>3</sup> Montgomery County Climate Action Plan (2021) Available from: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/green/climate/index.html>



- We are pleased that this year's budget continues to include \$300,000 to continue the Community Justice Academy and recommend the program expands into more and new communities across the county.
- **Racial equity and social justice:** We ask the County Council to approve and fully fund the Office of Racial Equity & Social Justice Program (ORESJ) at 1.4M.<sup>4</sup> We look forward to seeing the ORESJ work become embedded into every department over time and funded accordingly. We support the continued funds to expand the Asian American Health Initiative, Latino Health Initiative, and African American Health Programs that were crucial during the pandemic and helped to connect and create more networks across the county. We support funds going into the county's farm to food bank program and to continue the work of the county's Food Resilience efforts.
- **Electrification and clean energy:** We support the County's commitment to reaching our greenhouse gas reduction goals by investing on electrifying and reducing emissions from buildings and cars.
  - \$250,000 increase in climate grants. This will increase community-based climate residence across communities in the county.
  - \$250,000 increase energy audits for buildings subject to Building Energy Performance Standards (BEPS) and a \$250,000 increase for Community Choice Energy consultant. With residential and commercial buildings being the largest emitters of GHG in the county<sup>5</sup>, it is essential the county invest in this sector to reach the county's climate goals.
  - \$100,000 for Electric Vehicle Co-op Management Program. However, we recommend that along with more EV improvements, the goal of the county should be to reduce the reliance of cars in general as EV cars still do take up space on roads, still are a source of air pollution via tire particulates, and still cause congestion.
  - We support the increase of almost \$700,000 to continue and expand funding of the Montgomery Green Bank to ensure a continuation on the electrification and switching to cleaner, renewable energy for residents and businesses in the county.

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<sup>4</sup> Racial Equity & Social Justice. Montgomery County Operating Budget FY24. Available from: <https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/BASISOPERATING/Common/BudgetSnapshot.aspx?ID=25P01&TYPE=E>

<sup>5</sup> Montgomery County Climate Action Plan. Montgomery County Greenhouse Gas Emissions. Figure 25. Page 74. Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/climate/Resources/Files/climate/climate-action-plan.pdf>



## **WE RECOMMEND**

The following are areas where we recommend the County Council to consider adding the more funds in the following categories or modify these.

- **Stormwater:** Montgomery County has done great work meeting regulatory requirements for stormwater, but these requirements are not enough to protect our streams and watersheds. While some watersheds' health has been improving, many are still declining. What streams need is getting more complicated, too: in the summer, climate change drives more explosive storms that overwhelm the kinds of projects installed to date; and in the winter, more and more salting ahead of unpredictable snowstorms leads to toxic salinity conditions in streams. Please see the Stormwater Partners Network written testimony for more detail on our stormwater-related recommendations.
- **Water Quality Protection Charge (WQPC):** Nature Forward believes that the Water Quality Protection Charge (WQPC) needs to begin rising at more than the cost of baseline program delivery and keep pace with inflation, in order to increase our ambition as a county to truly return our watersheds to health. The FY24 recommended rate of \$128.00/Equivalent Residential Unit, spread across 368,000 ERUs, is designed to fund the County's current rate of ambition in meeting its relatively modest MS4 permit. This rate does not account for additional stormwater work beyond the permit, nor does it fund the ever-growing costs of flood management. Please see the Stormwater Partners Network written testimony for more detail on our WQPC recommendations.
- **Flooding:** County council should begin considering and preparing ahead the upcoming billions which will take to repair and improve our existing stormwater infrastructure and landscape to adapt to the more frequent and larger climate change driven storms. DEP's upcoming Comprehensive Flood Management Plan<sup>6</sup> will give the Council the list of urgent projects that need to be completed and also a price range for these. It is critical that the County Council begins planning now before more lives continue to be impacted like those tragically lost during the 2021 Rock Creek Woods apartments flooding.
- **Recycling:** DEP's Recycling and Resource Management Division<sup>7</sup> helps county residents put in place better recycling practices but needs more resources. In particular, the Waste Reduction and Recycling Section has fewer multi-family inspectors compared to the single-family households' inspectors. Council could allocate more funds and resources to recycling inspections and outreach as the county continues to grow, especially in multi-family properties.
- **Parks:** The Parks Department maintains 421 parks across 37,000 acres of parkland, including community gardens, museums and historic buildings, hundreds of miles of

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<sup>6</sup> Montgomery County Comprehensive Flood Management Plan. 2023. Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/flooding/county/plan.html>

<sup>7</sup> MoCo DEP - Recycling and Resource Management Division Available from: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/sws/>



natural and hard surface trails, nature centers, much more that provides programs and services that appeal to every interest and ability across county residents.<sup>8</sup> Montgomery Parks is currently receiving a budget cut relative to inflation. Nature Forward asks the County Council to fully fund the Parks Department FY24 Operating Budget request and add \$4.3M back to their budget. If Parks are not funded at this rate, then there will be a hiring freeze, community-based events will be on a hold along with park maintenance for new and newly acquired parks.

- **Transit:** In Montgomery County, the transportation sector is the largest contributor<sup>9</sup> to greenhouse gas emissions. The County must reduce its emissions by investing in transit to move people, instead of cars, around safely and efficiently. We support the County's commitment to transition to zero-emissions by investing into the Bethesda Circulator buses, and hope this is replicated across other parts of the county too.<sup>10</sup> Would like to see more funds into pedestrian safety and preservation of roadside trees. Safety and healthy environments should not need to compete with one another in location nor funds.

On behalf of Nature Forward and our 28,000 members and supporters, we recommend that the County Council supports and takes into consideration our FY24 Operating Budget comments and recommendations. We believe allocating funds these programs it is important for the wellbeing of county residents, wildlife, and our waterways.

Sincerely,

Denisse Guitarra

MD Conservation Advocate

Nature Forward

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<sup>8</sup> Montgomery Parks. Available at: <https://montgomeryparks.org/about/parks/>

<sup>9</sup> Montgomery County Climate Action Plan. Montgomery County Greenhouse Gas Emissions. Figure 25. Page 74. Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/climate/Resources/Files/climate/climate-action-plan.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Climate Change. Montgomery County Operating Budget FY23. DOT section. Available from: <https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/BASISOPERATING/Common/Chapter.aspx?ID=CC>